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LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

“A little theatrical but mostly athletic”: The mutable erotics of Miranda July’s *The First Bad Man*

Emma Sullivan^{1*}

Abstract: By attending to the inherent flux of sexual fantasy, Miranda July’s first novel *The First Bad Man* reveals a mobile and mutable erotics capable of generating an enlarged range of self-identification and relational intimacy, far from any essentialist assumptions of stable or coherent sexual identity. July focuses specifically upon role-play as the means to unpack the normative categories of hetero/homosexuality, masculinity and femininity, celebrating rather than pathologising qualities like superficiality and inconsistency. The novel touches upon many polarising issues (for example, sexual violence, sadomasochism and assisted reproductive technology), deftly avoiding the conventional language which colours perception. Both erotic and humorous, *The First Bad Man* helps to redefine the often highly charged discourse around sex and sexuality.

Subjects: Feminism; Cultural Sexuality; American & Canadian Literature; 21st Century Literature; Feminist Literature & Theory; Literature & Culture; Literature & Gender Studies; Psychoanalytical Theory; Queer Theory

Keywords: mutability; metamorphosis; erotics; sexual identity; gender; role-play; inauthenticity; Miranda July; *The First Bad Man*

Miranda July’s startling first novel, *The First Bad Man* (2015a) is notable for its thoroughgoing engagement with mutation and metamorphosis; its multiple criss-crossings of the lines that define identity, gender and sexuality, undoing the notional fixity of such categories in favour of an ongoing “coming into being” (Brownstein, 2014, n.p.) The novel’s anti-identitarianism suggests a clear kinship with queer theory’s rejection of the conventional rubrics governing gender and sexuality—the “common sense of our time”—which offer “inconceivably coarse axes of categorisation” (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 22). In the presentation of sexual identity as a unitary category, for instance, Eve Sedgwick

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Miranda July’s first novel *The First Bad Man* uses the indeterminacy inherent in sexual fantasy to reveal a potentially utopian model of sexuality free from the fixity of conventional categories. July overturns the conventional importance of authenticity in both sexuality and identity more generally, and instead celebrates qualities like superficiality and inconsistency. The novel touches upon many polarising issues (for example, sexual violence, sadomasochism and assisted reproductive technology), deftly avoiding the conventional language which colours perception. Characterised by an unusual synthesis of the comic and the erotic, the novel helps to redefine the often highly charged discourse around sex and sexuality.

demonstrates how multiple variations are condensed: biological sex, self-perceived gender, the preponderance of traits of personality and appearance, the biological sex of your preferred partner and the gender assignment of your preferred partner, to list just a few (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 7). July's novel delights in exploiting the disjunction between these elements, moving away from "objective, empirical categories (however contested)" such as hetero/homosexuality, masculinity and femininity, instead portraying the—queer—subject "undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (1993, p. 9), in particular through the means of role-play. July's very specific tone accommodates this slippage between sexual, emotional, domestic and spiritual intimacies: a tone at once tender and sardonic; the almost screwball humour of the novel at one with its emotional perspicacity. The naivety of her narrator, Cheryl, is also crucial in allowing for the ontological freedom of the novel, securing a space that is largely innocent of the politicised language that structures much of the discourse around sexuality and gender.

Insisting upon the significance of role-play both as part of sexual fantasy and of subjectivity more generally, the novel demonstrates the degree to which experience is mediated through the settings and scripts of "third-party" representations (such as novels, films or pornography), which "feed individual fantasy", thereby "refashioning subjectivities and reshaping sexual practice" (Ziv, 2014, p. 887). The significance of these scripts is often regarded as suspect, but July reveals the productive potential of performance and role-play. Her affirmation of an "inauthentic" or radically superficial model of subjectivity and sexuality is unusual; as Ava Kofman points out, *The First Bad Man's* use of "the artifice of the performance in the service of intimacy" is at odds with the more conventional dynamic whereby performance leads to narcissism and alienation (Kofman, 2015, n.p.). July's preoccupation with artifice "in the service of intimacy" is long-standing, as is clear from her comments about the inevitability of role-play in an interview discussing her first feature film *Me, You and Everyone We Know*. She describes one of the characters, Richard, as "someone who is afraid to play a role (of father or lover) because it feels fake to him- he feels 'like a man in a book.'" But July refutes this, insisting that "we must play roles, and believe in them enough to connect to each other through them". For her, artifice or inauthenticity is inevitable, and must be celebrated not disavowed: "Yes! It's not real! But let's pretend it is, let's celebrate it and in doing so, let's believe in the invention of us together" (Kushner & July, 2005, p. 64). *The First Bad Man* dramatises this affirmation, and in celebrating rather than pathologising qualities like superficiality and inconsistency, the novel opens up a playful and richly productive space.¹

One of the central aspects of Cheryl's life is her enduring passion for an older man, Phillip, a trustee on the board of the company she works for, an organisation called Open Palm, which began as a self-defence studio and now mostly sells fitness DVDs. Her connection with Phillip, which she is convinced has existed through "a hundred thousand lifetimes" (p. 12) is based entirely in fantasy; as is her connection with a baby she met once as a child, whom she calls Kubelko Bondy, and whose reincarnated soul she searches for in every baby she passes. The core of the novel's action begins when she tries to articulate her feelings to Phillip, who responds to her attempts at intimacy with news of his own "crush", a 16-year old called Kirsten. Cheryl's distress is compounded by the arrival of an unwanted guest: Clee, the daughter of her Open Palm bosses, a young woman who becomes increasingly aggressive. Initially merely insolent, Clee's behaviour becomes more and more threatening, and she begins to physically intimidate Cheryl: pushing her against a wall; crushing her wrist. Deeply confused both by Clee's behaviour, and her own anger, Cheryl's initial attempts at a confrontation falter as she imagines herself through Clee's eyes: "[s]he could see I'd gotten all geared up—a forty-three-year-old woman in a blouse, ready to brawl" (p. 57). Mortified, she retreats: "It took a day to become calm and gather up my pride. Delicate was the word Phillip had used to describe me. A delicate woman would not throw punches in her own home" (p. 59). The degree to which the "imitative reproduction of the self image [...] involves a detour through the eyes of the other" (Phelan, 1993, p. 36) is clear: Cheryl's self image is structured first by her interpretation of Clee's perception, and then by Phillip's. Using Clee to police her femininity, Cheryl is appalled by the reflected self-image she imagines, which reveals the inappropriateness of her aggression, for her gender and

her age. She swings to Phillip's "perspective", and *composes* herself, constructing herself anew in order to dispose herself in a more appropriate manner. The episode is symptomatic of what Judith Butler describes as the "incessant activity" of "doing" gender, "performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing" (Bryan-Wilson, 2004, p. 1). In these initial instances, we see some of the coercive, restrictive ways in which gender operates as "a system of rules, conventions, social norms, and institutional practices that performatively produce the subject they claim to describe" (Preciado, 2013, p. 110).

Cheryl's increasing rage at Clee's bullying is compounded by her frustration at Phillip's continual imbrication of her in his relationship with Kirsten, and, as Clee's physical aggression escalates into full body attacks, Cheryl finally retaliates, kicking and hitting. Her initial triumph proves to be a sweet relief from a lifelong, unacknowledged rage, manifested somatically in her "globus hystericus" (p. 2), a throat condition which at its worst prevents her from swallowing. Both obscurely satisfied by the violence, the pair continue their improvised fights until Cheryl realises they have been seen by Rick (a man Cheryl believes to be a gardener)², and tries frantically "to concoct a more clinical way to fight, something organised and respectable, less feverish" (p. 85), and alights upon the idea of using old Open Palm self defence videos to provide formalised scenarios. Using attack simulations like "A Day at the Park", "Gang Defense" and "Woman Asking Directions" (p. 86, 87), Cheryl is able to re-configure the violence between herself and Clee in accordance with some degree of notional social legibility. "If only Rick had seen 'Domestic Traps' instead of whatever it was we were doing before. This wasn't anything, just a re-creation of a simulation of the kind of thing that might happen to a woman if she didn't keep her wits about her" (p. 87). Cheryl's comically forced insouciance incidentally unpacks the layers of mimicry involved in any production of "realness" (Butler, 1993, p. 129).

As the scenarios make clear, the urgency of effecting "realness" is most acute in the practice of gender, and in her mimicry of the gestures of the videos' female protagonist, Cheryl's performances reflect "on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced" (Butler, 1993, p. 125). A woman with an ambivalent relationship to femininity, she enjoys the novelty of role-playing an ultra feminine persona: "My hair felt long and heavyweight on my back; I swung my hips a little, knowing I was being watched, hunted even. It was interesting to be this kind of person, so unself-conscious and exposed, so feminine" (p. 88). Ostensibly empowering, the "how-to" videos, like the original classes offered by Open Palm in the days when it "was just a women's self-defense studio" (p. 14), regulate "the production and maintenance of gender norms" (Bryan-Wilson, 2004, p. 55) by instituting a model of male aggression and female vulnerability. Cheryl's memory of the suddenly ominous atmosphere in the classes when the "attackers came out in their giant-headed foam pummel suits and began to simulate rape, gang rape, sexual humiliation, and unwanted caress" explicitly reveals the active production of gendered norms. "The men inside were actually kind and peaceable—almost to a fault—but they became quite vulgar and heated during the role-plays" (p. 14). The classes codify or programme gender roles—the usually "kind and peaceable" men conscripted into aggression. Cheryl and Clee's appropriation of the scenarios both reveals and undoes the gender prescription of the classes, and in their simulations, the often heavily anxious work of everyday gender practice are ritualised into a kind of theatre, or art practice, an interpretation suggested by the textual framing of the initial description of the scenarios. The paragraph opens thus: "**COMBAT WITH NO BAT (1996)**" (p. 86)—italicised and in bold, like the title of a performance piece. The title suggests that these "simulations" or performances are a form of "enabling" choreography³ which both relieves Cheryl's repressed rage and allows Clee to begin to freely articulate her sexuality. In her role-playing as the masculine sexual predator, Clee choreographs "butchness", and begins to conceive of herself as a sexual subject, rather than a sexual object. Busty, blonde—a "bombshell" (p. 23)—Clee is so much an archetypal object for male lust that she is seen as public property:

Women looked her up and down and then looked away. Men did not look away—they kept looking after they passed her, to get the rear view. I turned and made stern faces at them, but they didn't care. Some men even said hi, as if they knew her, or as if knowing her was about to begin right now. (p. 29)

Her body is so mediated by cultural associations of amplified femininity that conventional protocols of politeness or respect are displaced by a sense of casual ownership. Wearily accustomed to such reactions, the novel suggests that Clee has never consciously questioned her heterosexuality, and she is initially quick to reject the suggestion that there is anything sexual about the “simulations”, over-reacting to Cheryl’s gift of a scented candle: “I appreciate the gift but I’m not ... you know. I’m into dick” (p. 75). The enabling choreography of the simulations allows her to experiment with gender play, and offers her the opportunity for liberating cross-identification.⁴

If performance art is one idiom that the enabling choreography between the two women alludes to, then perhaps another is pornography. With titles like “Gang Defense” and “Woman Asking Directions”, the scenarios describe erotically suggestive tableaux which deal directly with sexualised violence. However, while the scenarios allow July to examine themes of submission and domination, or masochism and sadomasochism, which are integral to the structures of much pornography, the link is never explicitly articulated, a silence which allows July the freedom to explore sexualised violence at one remove. The “sex wars” of the 1970s and 80s are long past, but a great deal of ambivalence about pornography remains; within academia the debate may have been won by the pro-sex feminists, but “for the general public, the antiporn position is usually taken to represent the feminist position on pornography” (Ziv, 2015, p. 2). The Open Palm scenarios allows July to investigate masochism dispassionately; “shifting the field” (p. 153) from the usual scenes which structure conventional imaginaries of alternative eroticisms. Predicated upon an essentialist model of female passivity and male aggression, the scenarios are then transformed through their appropriation by Cheryl and Clee, an appropriation that creates a formalised or boundaried environment for erotic experiment. Once we conceptualise their fights in this way, a kinship emerges between Cheryl and Clee’s practice and that of BDSM, (bondage, discipline or domination, sadism or submission and masochism). Such erotic practices still suggest the outer limits of what Gayle Rubin calls “the sex hierarchy” (Rubin, 1992, p. 150), the “abnormal” to the “normal” of “vanilla” sex, the stigmatised “lower order” (1992, p. 150) to the more privileged forms of sexuality, but the arrangement between Cheryl and Clee does not play to anxiety about “scary sex” (1992, p. 152), rather it is playful, even absurd. This is not to say the situation is without risk: neither of the women understands what is going on between them, and they seldom feel able to attempt any articulation or definition. Indeed, that absence of definition is precisely July’s objective: just as pornography is not mentioned explicitly, neither are masochism or sadomasochism—the words are simply not part of the characters’ vocabulary. This is a deliberate omission on July’s part⁵: it is one of her strategies in approaching the subject from a fresh perspective. In Rubin’s account, one of the key “ideological formations” which restricts thinking about sexuality, along with “the hierarchical valuation of sex acts”, is “the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation” (1992, p. 150); July looks to conceptualise “benign sexual variation” by removing the conventional labels.

The audacity and freshness of her attempt to “shift the field” becomes clearer when compared to another novel much preoccupied with ideas of domination and submission, the bestselling *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012). The novel, which addresses BDSM in terms which very much rely upon and perpetuate a conventional imaginary, describes the relationship between a young, inexperienced and beautiful woman and an older, experienced and wealthy man, whose BDSM practice is both abusive and borne out of abuse, “all wrapped up in a great big toxic fantasy of wealth and glamour” (Jenkins, 2015, n.p.). Despite the dungeons and cable ties, it is a deeply hetero-normative romance of gleaming penthouses and glossy bodies, which lazily pathologises BDSM, while reiterating dangerous conventions about submitting to violence “out of love”. In July’s rendering these stale tropes are radically reconfigured: here the relationship is between two ostensibly heterosexual women, and the young woman is the aggressor, while the older woman, despite being the one to improvise the boundaried environment, is entirely inexperienced. And in place of stupefying materialism, the backdrop for the simulations is Cheryl’s small, sparsely furnished house, which speaks to the more commonplace reality of finite resources and compromised, humdrum aesthetics.

Cheryl's inexperience or naivety is instrumental in creating the novel's very specific tone, a kind of "ground-zero" of razed conventions and preconceptions. Like many of July's protagonists, Cheryl is profoundly innocent about intimacy, and the reader's experience of her perspective defines the terms upon which the novel's eroticism develops. Forty-three years old, single and without any close friends, she has very little experience of relationships; when she does experience sleeping together "interlocked like two Ss", she is convinced it is evidence of a rare synchronicity, only to be told that "[a]ny two people can do it" (p. 213). Without the experience or vocabulary for "spooning", slightly more arcane concepts like "masochism" or "sado-masochism" are entirely alien to her. It is Cheryl's therapist who gives her the phrase "adult games" to make sense of the simulations, vocabulary which resolves the weirdness of the situation sufficiently for her to relax and "flit" around the city, luxuriating in the feeling of being part of the human collective. She watches a couple next to her in a cafe:

It was hard to believe they played adult games but most likely they did, probably with their co-workers or relatives. What were other people's like? Perhaps some mothers and fathers pretended to be their children's children and made messes. Or a widow might sometimes become her own deceased husband and demand retribution from everyone. (p. 82)

Her daydreams of other people's "adult games" have an oblique, child-like quality, which transforms the conventional sexual paranoia that fixates on normal or abnormal, good or bad, into an altogether different register. The expanded set of possibilities suggested by Cheryl's musings demonstrates the impoverishment of a paradigm predicated upon anxiously policed binaries. This novel, and indeed all of July's work, attempts to extend the narrow range of the "visibly" erotic, by revealing a larger spectrum of sexuality.

When Cheryl describes the simulations to her therapist, Ruth-Anne, she tells her the experience is "like square dancing or tennis ... a real vacation for the brain".

"So you would describe your pleasure as ...?"

"A little theatrical but mostly athletic. And I'm the most surprised of anyone because I've never been good at sports." (p. 91)

The reader might suspect that her endearing naivety blinds her to the obvious, but perhaps instead she shows the potential richness of not "getting it". Like her daydreams of adult games, her descriptions conceptualise a diffuse erotic hinterland, the benign variations which might or might not flame into localised passion.

The dim registers of this erotic spectrum suddenly do ignite into the specifically sexual, and the metamorphosis hinges upon a single word. Clee has commandeered the house for a party and Cheryl is absentmindedly watching her dancing, and thinking about Phillip's "sexts":

Philip was already having intercourse with Kirsten, I could feel it—from his point of view, I was in him, in her. Each time Clee sang *jiddy jiddy rah rah* she pumped her pelvis forward to the beat and her bosom bounced. Dear God, look at those jugs, Phillip panted. I whispered the word. "Jugs." (p. 107)

Cheryl's characteristically decorous choice of "bosom" is translated into "Jugs", a word borrowed from the vocabulary used by Phillip in his "sexts" about Kirsten. Cheryl occupies his language like a prosthesis, in the same way she occupies his body in fantasy: "My big, hairy hand worked itself down the front of her jeans and my fingers, with their thick blocky fingernails, slid into her puss" (p. 107/108). Thus begins a period of intense erotic activity, as Cheryl fantasises and masturbates compulsively

about Clee, initially through the “medium” of Philip. When she describes the new mutation of the relationship with Clee to Ruth-Anne, Cheryl is very clear that she is “tapping into Phillip’s lust”

“Right. And perhaps we don’t even need to call it Philip’s lust? Maybe it’s just lust”.

“Well, it’s not *mine*. These just aren’t the kinds of things I would think about, on my own, without him.” [...]

“I see. And how does Cheryl Glickman feel?”

“Me?” (p. 111)

She is startled by the reference to Cheryl Glickman—the name of a subject she almost fails to recognise, so entirely submerged is she in “hosting” Phillip.⁶ Initially using Dana, the protagonist of the self-defence scenarios, to relate to Clee—“Every gesture, every scream, every glare and growl I’d made for the last week was Dana’s” (p. 90)—Cheryl now uses Phillip; the scripts of “third-party” representations overtly mobilised “in the service of intimacy” (Kofman, 2015, n.p.). However, Cheryl is initially oblivious to the potential intimacy with Clee, her crush on Phillip dominating her vision to such an extent that she is blind to the increasingly obvious signs of Clee’s affection. Framing the experience as a way of being close to him, she imagines the fantasies as “another roiling corner of our journey together” (p. 110), soon however, while Clee remains the constant, Cheryl has to use the novelty of other men to “achieve cream” (p. 117):

A thin nerdy lad I saw in Whole Foods: Clee followed him out to his car, begged him to let her hold his stiff member for one to two minutes. An Indian father who politely asked me directions with his shy wife in tow: Clee rubbed her puss all over his body and forced stiffness out of him, he was whining in ecstasy when his wife walked in. Too nervous to say anything, she waited silently until her husband creamed on Clee’s jugs. Old grandfathers who hadn’t had sex in years, virginal teenage boys named Colin, homeless men riddled with hepatitis. (p. 117/118)

No oblique, subtle shading on the spectrum here, just a few notes banged out loudly, the “hordes of imaginary men” necessary to compensate for the fantasy’s monotony. But the men themselves, hardly the stuff of “sanctioned fantasies, sanctioned imaginaries” (Butler, 1993, p. 130), continue the work of a dissident erotics, comically resisting conformity. Clearly, the most obvious aspect of the novel’s alternative erotics are Cheryl’s male cross-identifications, which complicate the simple symmetry of “heterosexual” and “homosexual”, illustrating Eve Sedgwick’s interest in masturbation as “a productive and necessary switch-point in thinking about the relations...between homo- and heteroeroticism” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 112), by offering a form of sexuality which runs “fully athwart the precious and embattled sexual identities whose meaning and outlines we always insist on thinking we know” (1993, p. 113). Masturbation (and its attendant fantasies) offers a uniquely heterogeneous erotic space, free of “the cultural entailments of ‘sexual identity’” (1993, p. 115). It is a space moreover of erotic self-relation, which as Sedgwick reminds us, is necessarily same-sex and therefore shares a certain “homo” quality with homosexuality.

As Cheryl’s masturbation becomes the central focus of the narrative, the obliquely pornographic references of the first part of the novel are ramped up into an emphatically discordant mess of rampant sexual obsession; delicacy and decorum gleefully annihilated—an intention spelled out by the first time Cheryl (as Phillip) masturbates, when semen explodes across the room, “[a] rope of semen” even hitting “the top of the dresser, splattering across my hairbrush, my earring box, and the picture of my mother as a young woman” (p. 108). Despite its explicitness, having established Cheryl’s naivety as the grounds for the evolving erotics of the novel, this section is underwritten by a paradoxical innocence, as Cheryl applies herself to her new masturbatory regime with the air of a child with a new toy. Perhaps the most striking aspect of her “paradoxical innocence” is the relative absence of shame. She

does feel shame, especially when she finally realises she has hurt Clee's feelings, but the typical expressive structures or atmospherics of shame, what Sandra Bartky calls shame's "affective taste" or "emotional coloration" (Bartky, 1990, p. 88) are missing from the novel. When critics disparage *The First Bad Man* for being "goofy" (Kiesling, 2015, n.p.), they deny the significance of that lightness of tone, the screwball, absurdist quality that is so disarming and, I would argue, so useful in addressing issues long shrouded in shame and "murk". July's comedy is crucial in countering the dominant Western paradigm, where, in Gayle Rubin's words, "sex is taken all too seriously" (Rubin, 1992, p. 171).⁷

That lightness is also evident in the novel's swift movement through the episodes that mark the permutations of Cheryl and Clee's relationship. Once the "spell" of Cheryl's obsessive masturbating is broken, Clee's unplanned pregnancy takes centre stage and Cheryl moves from psychically submitting Clee to her aggressive fantasies, indifferent to her feelings, to nurturing her. Outraged by her daughter's pro-life decision to put the baby up for adoption rather than have an abortion, Clee's biological mother absents herself, and Cheryl finds herself acting as a surrogate mother, accompanying Clee to prenatal check-ups and supervising her diet. The birth is complicated, and Clee feels unable to give the ailing baby away; partly borne out of that intensity, her relationship with Cheryl undergoes another metamorphosis, and they become lovers, and parents. The novel confidently navigates this startling series of transitions from antagonists to mother and daughter, to lovers and parents; shifting registers through screwball to stricken concern, cycling swiftly through each new episode. Cheryl and Clee's "unspoken agreement" that they "wouldn't look back" (p. 140) allows their relationship to mutate without any attachment to consistency, and without shame.

Mutation or metamorphosis are crucial modes for the novel, structuring principles that are enacted both thematically and formally: inconsistency is a veritable article of faith. If "sex is taken all too seriously" (Rubin, 1992, p. 171) in our culture, then so too is sexual identity; Foucault's argument that sexuality is understood as revealing the "truth" about the individual, still prevails—it remains remarkable the degree to which sexual orientation is thought to reveal a person's "essence". *The First Bad Man* counters this by presenting instead the fluidity—and the radical inconsistency—of sexual identity. As July comments in interview, "[a]ll of us need to realise it's all actually pretty slippery – we are all reorienting ourselves all the time as far as orientation" (Siddall, 2015, n.p.). Her belief in the necessity of playing roles, and of believing "in them enough to connect to each other through them" (Kushner & July, 2005, p. 64) clearly also extends to sexuality. It is significant that in the scene when Cheryl and Clee finally do have sex, where another writer might feel compelled to effect an "authentic" moment of communion, Cheryl once again falls into playing the role of Phillip, as she feels Clee's breasts "pressing against my hard, hairy chest [...] and her actual wet puss sliding against my stiff member" (p. 226). It is not dissociative or pathological, rather it is the only way she knows of being present sexually. We can argue that her fantasy is fundamentally inauthentic in its hetero-normativity, but for Cheryl, the heterosexual model still provides the abiding paradigm for sexual exchange, as much because it embodies erotic specificity. She does not have the conceptual apparatus to allow her to participate "authentically" in sex with another woman. But July's point is precisely that "authentic" participation is an impossible and self-defeating aspiration, after all, as queer theorist Jane Ward asks, "can any sexuality be truly authentic, or uninfluenced by our cultural context?" (Ward, 2013, p. 133) Ward poses these questions in an essay that argues with the feminist Ariel Levy's warnings about "the rise of raunch culture", and the increasing commodification of women's sexuality. While agreeing with Levy's emphasis upon the ways in which women are represented, "feminine appearance and heterosexual desirability" valued above all else, Ward worries that Levy's assertion that women have been "alienated from their authentic sexual desires" (2013, p. 133), and her insistence upon a "genuine female desire" (2013, p. 134) existing beyond or outside culture, relies upon an unthinking essentialism that ultimately seeks to pre-empt and anticipate female desire.⁸ Ward's analysis picks up on much older concerns about the prescriptive tendencies of some feminist thought, for example, Gayle Rubin and Amber Hollibaugh in the early 1980s, who worried that the framing of sex as complicit in patriarchal practices created a profound suspicion of all sexuality, a sense that "anything sexual now is unhealthy and contaminated because of the culture" (English, Hollibaugh, & Rubin, 1982, p. 41). The only "legitimate" sex is very limited: "[i]t's not

focussed on orgasms, it's very gentle and it takes place in the context of a long-term, caring relationship" (English et al., 1982, p. 44). As Ward's concerns about Levy suggest, many of the confusions and prohibitions of the 1980s and 1990s remain current, despite third-wave feminism's project of reclaiming and embracing a diverse female sexuality. July's insistence upon the necessity of inauthenticity brings significant clarity to a contested terrain: Cheryl's role-playing reflecting the "slippery" subjectivities of fantasy, and the unruly and often wildly inappropriate circuits of desire, rather than the dogmatically correct procedures of a "genuine", politically suitable, sexuality.

The mutability of Cheryl's subject position in her sexual fantasies allows a move away from accounts of fantasy which insist upon simple and unvarying identifications along gender lines, and "away from fantasy as an activity which mainly serves to fix subject positions" (Kaplan, 1986, p. 152/153). While in Cheryl's initial fantasies about Clee she identifies as Phillip, in most of the subsequent episodes she participates in the scene without being assigned any fixed place. When, for instance, a plumber, "a chubby Latino man", comes to fix the shower, Cheryl becomes aroused when she sees his eyes "grow sluggish" at the sight of Clee on the couch. Her fantasy begins as she imagines his astonishment when Clee, half naked, enters the bathroom:

He wasn't sure at first, he didn't want to get in trouble. But she begged and tugged at the wide matronly front of his pants. In the end he was not as polite as he seemed. No sirree. He had quite a bit of pent-up rage, possibly from racial injustice and immigration issues, and he worked through all of it. (p. 117)

The question of who Cheryl identifies with or as is often irrelevant; her participation is desubjectivised. As July says:

I realised that who you end up playing when you fantasise is really pretty loopy goosey. Sometimes it's just like a flash of a bunch of images y'know. It's like, who are you in it? Are you just watching? Is the woman in it you? Or, is it someone who you know, is it someone else? (Siddall, 2015, n.p.)

The heterogeneity of sexual fantasy can cause anxiety and suspicion, when so much rests upon stable or coherent sexual identities. The feminist exhortation to "overhaul desire" (Bartky, 1990, p. 51), in the search for an "authentic" or "politically correct" sexuality is just one example of a pervasive mistrust of fantasy, which is commonly conceptualised as a delusion or an escape; a model July refutes. She insists instead upon the centrality of fantasy as a crucial part of psychic life, as "a process required for human sexuality and subjectivity to be set in place and articulated, rather than a process that is either good or bad, or of which we can have too much or too little" (Kaplan, 1986, p. 153). The positive critical responses to the novel attest to a rather startled sense of recognition: Chris Ware, for example, describes how the "yes, 'that's really the way it is!' moments [...] came [...] fast and furious", and applauds the way in which it reveals "the uncharted world of unspeakable desires, embarrassing hopes and shifting conquests" (Ware, 2015, n.p.); while Lena Dunham writes that "[n]ever before has a novel spoken so deeply to my sexuality [...], my secret self" (2015, n.p.). These "unspeakable" "embarrassing" and "secret" desires are at the very fore of Cheryl's experience, fantasies which constitute the mesh through which the world is mediated. By articulating this so frankly, with humour, and without shame, July contests the habitual characterisation of fantasy as both dubious and somehow isolated, and isolating, from everyday life.

As Ada Kofman points out, it is not just Cheryl who experiences the world like this, rather, "[e]verybody in *The First Bad Man* is living out a fantasy, whether the source material is a pornographic stereotype, strange dream, childhood memory, or Hollywood movie" (Kofman, 2015, n.p.). While Cheryl uses "Philip" to have sex with Clee, Clee in turn uses an image of "Cheryl" dressed in a long corduroy dress. Worn for an unsuccessful date with the father of one of Clee's friends several years before, the image of Cheryl "dressed like a lesbian" (p. 109) reached Clee and became a kind of talisman in her nascent lesbianism.⁹ Knowing dimly that the dress is significant for Clee, Cheryl wears it and Clee becomes

aroused: “her eyes locked onto the pennies in my shoes and slowly crawled up the length of corduroy dress, button by button [...] I had never been looked at this way before, like a fantasy come to life” (p. 225). Philip also needs an intermediary: before sex begins, he masturbates while watching unspecified images on his phone. When he and Cheryl have sex, the levels of mediation are multiplied to an absurd degree, as Cheryl concentrates hard to replace the “real” Philip with her imaginary version. The “real Philip” interrupts and everything scatters, so she gives up on her regular fantasy, and tries “to imagine the penis in me was my own version of Philip’s member and that I was doing the thrusting, into Clee. Once I got a hold on it, the scene felt very real. Like a memory” (p. 269). Fantasy mutates into memory, and the “real” becomes increasingly difficult to distil from the “unreal”.

There are clearly dangers here, some of which July illustrates through the fate of Cheryl’s therapist, Ruth-Anne. Her crush on a fellow therapist, Dr Broyard, grows to consume her entire identity, “[e]verything else in her life, including her therapy practice, was faked” (p. 258). A “big-boned”, androgynous woman, she transforms herself “through sheer force of will” into a “petite [...] delicate woman” (p. 257), and becomes “what he once said he wished his wife was: small, feminine, with a slightly conservative elegance” (p. 258). She gives herself over entirely to her fantasy of his fantasy and it is a living death. Cheryl recognises this as fantasy become “fixation” (p. 257), the equivalent to her obsession with Clee, and tries to break the “spell”. Ruth-Anne seems briefly to emerge, but in the presence of Dr Broyard the fixation once more descends and she tucks herself back into the shrunken shell of a fettered femininity, “almost relieved, it seemed” (p. 260).

Through Ruth-Anne, July examines femininity itself as fantasy, what Joan Riviere calls the “masquerade” of “womanliness” (Riviere, 1986, p. 38), a performance for a man, “as he would have her” (Heath, 1986, p. 50). For Luce Irigaray, “the masquerade has to be understood as what women do [...] in order to participate in men’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own” (1990, p. 133). In giving up her desire and giving herself over to Dr. Broyard’s definition of idealised femininity, Ruth-Anne absolves herself of the responsibilities of autonomy. In place of “the artifice of the performance in the service of intimacy” (Kofman, 2015, n.p.), here instead is self-alienation. This is the caveat—or the disclaimer—to July’s celebration of fantasy: while for much of the novel fantasy is productive, here, when it topples into obsession, it clearly is not. Squeezing herself into a “tight-fitting blouse” which minimises her broad shoulders, and wearing a “tartan headband” (p. 257) to pull back her hair, Ruth-Anne’s physical transformation is the inverse of Clee’s, whose “personal style” (p. 228) is also transformed through fantasy. The catalyst for Clee is the fantasy of the simulations, the choreography that enables her “butchness”, and allows her to replace the clothes that conform to a conventional fantasy of femininity, the pink velour pants and tank tops, with the androgyny of tuxedo shirts and green “army pants” (p. 228). Ruth-Anne also provides the foil to Cheryl’s decisions: while she gives way to conventional paradigms, Cheryl resists the pull of masculine expectations, when, after Clee leaves, Phillip comes looking for sympathy for his increasingly poor health, and proposes a life growing old together. Cheryl refuses his fantasy of a sedate, settled life together and instead chooses autonomy—and loneliness.

Her loneliness, however, is greatly mitigated by the presence of Clee’s baby, Jack. The relationship with Clee may not endure, but Cheryl’s bond with her baby does. Clee, acutely depressed after the birth, feels little for her son, and is relieved when Cheryl tentatively asks if she can keep him. In keeping with the novel’s constructivist treatment of all such seemingly irreducibly specific roles, maternity is presented here as a relationship that need have no correspondence with biological materiality. Indeed, in suggesting that it is Cheryl’s fantasy which generates Jack, the incarnation of the longed for baby Kubelko Bondy, the child allows July to demonstrate the degree to which materiality itself is phantasmatically structured; a spectrum which the novel illustrates running from Cheryl’s “globus hystericus” at one end, to a baby at the other. If Cheryl’s earlier use of the penis suggests Judith Butler’s notion of “the lesbian phallus”, an appropriation that displaces the privileged signifier from “traditional masculinist contexts”, then the baby might demonstrate a similar displacement, in which “[t]he phantasmatic status of ‘having’ is redelineated, rendered transferable, substitutable, plastic” (Butler, 1993, p. 89). Thus, in an admirably even-handed equivalence, the “phantasmic privilege” of motherhood is shown, like masculinity, to be available to “recirculation” (Butler, 1993, p. 85).

During Philip's final visit, Cheryl suddenly understands that he is Jack's father, whose name Clee has refused to divulge, and in imagining their meeting, also realises her unconscious involvement in bringing them together. She "didn't make" Jack, but, "did each thing right so he would be made". Rather than the normative heterosexual couple, a "web" of people have "spun" the child into being (p. 270). Studiedly unspecific and poetic though it is, the novel's treatment of maternity might suggest assisted reproductive technology (ART),¹⁰ a further addition to those medical and biotechnological developments of the late 1950s which are described by transfeminist Beatriz Preciado as theoretically threatening "the heterosexual dimorphic regime": "males are no longer guaranteed to impregnate, females stop menstruating under the effects of the contraceptive pill, and lactation is provided by food industries instead of by female breasts" (Preciado, 2013, p. 105). However, as Preciado points out, despite the contemporary possibilities of "the technical construction of sexual difference", we are still far from creating an "alternative (multimorphic) epistemology for understanding bodies and desires" (p. 105). Perhaps July's novel rather suggests the limits of any attempt at such an epistemology. It might not be by chance that a therapist, who is supposed to know, becomes a victim of obsession or fixation, while Cheryl, who knows so little about herself as a woman, succeeds in becoming a mother. In thus performing the productive failure of knowledge, the novel questions the worth of one's own "knowledge" or "experience" of inhabiting the categories of "woman", "man", "homosexual" or "heterosexual". Attending to the inherent flux of fantasy, July is able to reveal a mobile and mutable erotics capable of generating an enlarged range of "self-perception and filiation" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 9), far from any essentialist assumptions of stable or coherent identity.

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Notes

1. One of its particular innovations is to focus upon the ways individuals appropriate and re-use cultural representations, which allows July to explore public forms of fantasy that are not corporate driven, forms that are "DIY", or homespun.
2. Rick's changing identity offers one of the novel's many incidental displays of mutability: Cheryl initially thinks of him as "the homeless gardener who came with the house" (11), but later in the novel, he is revealed to be a man who lives locally, who not having his own garden, tends to others'. Married, and seemingly prosperous, Cheryl's perception of him is transformed.
3. The theme of "enabling" choreography is recurrent in July's work; in the interactive sculptures first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2009, for example, which necessitate physical intimacy: one, a wide pedestal for two people which reads, "We don't know each other, we're just hugging for the picture ..." ("Eleven Heavy Things") Likewise, the seven-year internet project, "Learning to Love You More", produced in collaboration with artist Harrell Fletcher, in which more than 8,000 people submitted material in response to online assignments like "Braid someone's hair" and "Draw a picture of your friend's friend" (2007). Seemingly simple, even reductive, the work demonstrates the validity of William James's famous assertion that the physical expression

of emotion is the emotion, that "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful" (1884, n.p.). July's enabling choreography suggests that by coolly making the physical gestures of emotion, the emotion will follow; a radically unsentimental affective schematic in the service of what is in some respects a sentimental project, the attempt to make people connect to one another.

4. The novel's title comes from a moment when Cheryl is confused about which character from the "Gang Defense" scenario Clee is playing, one of the 'two bad men' or 'another man all in denim who didn't want trouble', and Clee clarifies impatiently, "The first bad man." Cheryl is struck by the anomaly that presents itself: 'She wasn't the first bad man ever but the first I'd ever met who had long blond hair and pink velour pants' (p. 91). The false correspondence between anatomical sex, gender and object-choice is clearly exposed.
5. In an interview with Carrie Brownstein about the novel, July describes trying to explore sexuality and gender "without ever using the politicizing words that we're used to" (Brownstein, 2014, n.p.).
6. In much the same way that other babies host Kubelko Bondy.
7. July's determination to counter the dominant paradigm is also evident in her interviews and media appearances. In a discussion about favourite books for *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* series, "By the Book", for instance, she mentions "The Romance of Lust" (published in 1873) in response to the question "What was the last book to make you laugh?" She describes it as a book which is "taboo after taboo, no shame" and "completely enjoyable on an erotic level". "It is more than 500 pages, so obviously don't read the whole thing—just dip in and get what you need". The synthesis of the erotic and the humorous—a characteristic of her own work—is unusual, as is the straightforward acknowledgement of the utilisation of the erotica, in getting "what you need". By adroitly introducing the category of erotica, July effectively re-engineers the conservative format of the interview, placing erotica on the same footing as the less marginal categories of childhood favourites,

- favourite short stories, etc. By refusing to accept the terms of the enquiry, she subtly redefines the often highly charged discourse around sex and sexuality (July, 2015b, *By the book*).
8. Ward goes on to develop this point further in relation to the definition of “feminist porn”: “[s]ure, market research may indicate that women do, in fact have group preferences (for deeper plot narratives, close-ups of female orgasms, and so on), but even these “feminist” preferences have been marketed to us, and arguably mirror simplistic cultural constructions of femininity, such as the notion that women’s sexuality is more mental or emotional than physical” (2013, p. 135).
 9. The suggestion here is that Clee, believing Cheryl to be a lesbian, had on some level deliberately sought her out. This potentially presents limits to the novel’s constructivism: Clee’s lesbianism pre-existing “the particular, performative acts” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 9) of the scenarios.
 10. Perhaps another instance in which July avoids “using the politicizing words that we’re used to” Brownstein, (2014, n.p.).

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